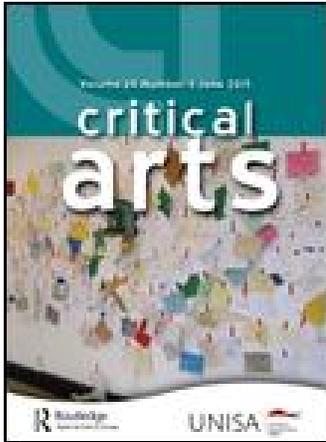


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Heading south: theory, *Viva Riva!* and *District 9*

Pier Paolo Frassinelli

Abstract

This article begins by reflecting on how the geopolitical configuration outlined in Edward Said's *Culture and imperialism* (1993) has been radically altered both by the decline of the US empire and, in conjunction with it, by what Jean and John Comaroff describe, in the subtitle of *Theory from the south* (2012), as Euro-America's evolution toward Africa. From there, the article turns to *Viva Riva!* (2010) and *District 9* (2009), two films that appropriate the conventions of Hollywood blockbusters to produce cinematic narratives set in contemporary African urban landscapes which lend themselves to be viewed through the lens of recent theoretical debates on the becoming global of the south. These films' gazes produce an image of African cities that is legible as a dystopic vision of the global future.

Keywords: Africa, cinema, culture, dystopia, global south, theory, urbanisation

In theory

Time goes by so fast. The occasion for the first draft of this article was provided by a call for papers inviting speakers 'to discuss the continuing relevance of Edward Said's *Culture and imperialism* (1993) on the twentieth anniversary of its publication' (AISCLI 2013). It is that long since Said's book appeared in print: a generation. And so it is unsurprising that, much as its exploration of the roots of imperialism in Western culture still has plenty to teach us, when one reopens the book it does not take long to notice it is in need of updating.

Published in the immediate aftermath of the first Persian Gulf War (1990–91), *Culture and imperialism* begins and ends with a passionate denunciation of

Pier Paolo Frassinelli is Associate Professor in the School of Communication, Faculty of Humanities, University of Johannesburg. pierpaolof@uj.ac.za



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American (US) global ascendancy and of the exceptionalist ideology on which its legitimisation was premised: ‘the last superpower, an enormously influential, frequently interventionary power nearly everywhere in the world’, Said (1993: 54) writes, ‘Today the United States is triumphalist internationally, and seems in a febrile way eager to prove that it is number one’ (ibid: 298). Said’s focus on the relation between culture and imperialism was dictated by an immediate concern that surfaces repeatedly in the text, and that is articulated by the construction of homologies between the ‘structure of feeling’ of the narratives that testify to the massive presence of imperialism in modern European culture – from Charles Dickens’, Joseph Conrad’s, Jane Austen’s and Rudyard Kipling’s novels to Verdi’s *Aida* and Camus’ writings – and the discourse of the new world order promulgated by US state agencies and their intellectual allies at the end of the Cold War. Hence the theory of recursivity that shapes the narrative of the book: the appearance and reappearance, first in European and then in American culture, of the idea of ‘*imperium* as [a] protracted, almost metaphysical obligation to rule’ (ibid: 10), whereby the rhetoric of the civilising mission of earlier empires is updated by the exceptionalist discourse of ‘American specialness, altruism, and opportunity’ (ibid: 8).

The writing of *Culture and imperialism* was also prompted by a desire to expand the arguments about the East presented in *Orientalism* (1978) – that is, to ‘describe a more general pattern of relationships between the modern metropolitan West and its overseas territories’ (ibid: xi) – as well as to fill its main narrative gap. ‘What I left out of *Orientalism*,’ Said notes, ‘was that response to Western dominance which culminated in the great movement of decolonization across the Third World’ (ibid: xii). So, in addition to generalising his earlier insights on how the othering and fixing of non-European identities constituted the epistemic foundation of the colonial enterprise, in *Culture and imperialism* Said also depicts how the ‘consolidated vision’ of imperial culture has been radically subverted by anti-colonial and postcolonial political and cultural movements. Crucially for Said, the legacy of the intellectual currents and figures produced by these movements is marked not so much, or in any case not exclusively, by an assertion of radical alterity, but most significantly by what he calls ‘the voyage in’ (ibid: 239–261): by the acts of appropriation and contamination performed by writers and intellectuals from the formerly colonised world – Said singles out C.L.R. James and George Antonius as the precursors of this type of cultural work – who ‘have imposed their diverse histories on, have mapped their local geographies in, the great canonical texts of the European centre’ (ibid: 62), and whose work has resulted in the production of new hybrid and cosmopolitan cultural formations. Said’s polemical target in underscoring the transnational character of these acts of cultural resistance and opposition is ‘the old categories, the tight separations, and the comfortable autonomies’ (ibid: 53) through which cultural boundaries are controlled by ‘the *police* action of simple dogma and loud patriotism’

(ibid: 15). In a programmatic passage placed at the end of the first chapter, Said writes that to oppose this dogma and undo the damage it has caused, ‘we must speak of overlapping territories, intertwined histories common to men and women, whites and non-whites, dwellers in the metropolis and on the peripheries, past as well as present and future’ (ibid: 61).

Over two decades down the line, these words elicit several considerations. The first, following Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s critical remarks in *Empire* (2000), is that even as Said looks at the new, post-Cold War world order, the privileged target of his critique remains how ‘current global power structures’ perpetuate the ‘cultural and ideological remnants of European colonialist rule’ (Hardt and Negri 2000: 146). For Hardt and Negri the result is that this critique misses the novelty and specific features of the decentred and deterritorialised form of rule they name ‘Empire’: ‘The passage to Empire emerges from the twilight of modern sovereignty. In contrast to imperialism, Empire establishes no territorial centre of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers’ (ibid: xii). Whether or not one agrees with everything Hardt and Negri have to say about ‘Empire’ – and many have argued that their statements about the decline in sovereignty of nation-states were quite overhasty (see, e.g., Balakrishnan 2003) – there is no doubt that the global hegemonic power of the US, which, as Said himself notes, had already started to be eroded in the 1980s by ‘the recession, the endemic problems posed by the cities, poverty, health, education, production, and the Euro-Japanese challenge’ (Said 1993: 298), has in the meantime been further weakened by the economic and financial crisis that exploded in 2008.¹ As macroeconomic indicators highlight, while the US and the rest of the West sluggishly advance or stagnate, it is the global south that has become the site of real economic action. In line with a now consolidated trend, at the beginning of 2013 the *Economist*’s annual almanac of predictions for the year ahead noted that the ten fastest-growing national economies were all located in Asia and Africa – six and four respectively – and one of its bloggers underscored that ‘only the emerging economies (a phrase that now seems to cover countries that have long since emerged – witness China, second only to America in economic weight)’ were promising ‘robust growth for the coming year’ (J.A. 2013).² Looking at the geopolitical world map today, locating a hegemonic centre of economic or political power certainly looks much more difficult than it was twenty years ago. Indeed, what appears to require scrutiny and revision is the very opposition between a ‘Western metropolitan world’ and its ‘peripheries’ which frames Said’s discussion of the ‘overlapping territories’ and ‘intertwined histories’ that make up his geopolitical coordinates.

In the Twenty-first century, the association of the term ‘metropolitan’ with the ‘Western world’ increasingly comes across as an anachronism. Of the twenty largest cities on the planet, calculated by metropolitan population, seventeen are in what we have become accustomed to call the global south, and only three are located in

the West.³ As Mike Davis (2006) notes, the current scale of urbanisation in Asia and Africa utterly dwarfs anything the West has ever experienced. In the 1980s, China added more urban dwellers than all of Europe did in the entire Nineteenth century. Cities like Dhaka, Kinshasa and Lagos are growing at a rate no Western city has ever approached. Urbanisation is moving south (even quicker than it is moving east). The data collected by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT) show that today Africa ‘has the fastest rate of urbanisation in the world’, which will result in this continent more than doubling its population ‘over the next two decades, from 294 million in 2000 to a staggering 742 million in 2030, and 1.2 billion in 2050’ (Pieterse 2011: 5).⁴ This process of urbanisation represents a watershed in world history, comparable to the Neolithic or Industrial revolutions (Davis 2006: 1–19). It is a sign – one of many – that some of the world’s most radical change is, for better or worse, happening in the global south.

This is, at least, the claim put forward by Jean and John Comaroff in *Theory from the south*, where they argue that contrary ‘to the received Euromodernist narrative of the past two centuries – which has the global south tracking behind the curve of Universal History, always in deficit, always playing catch up – there is good reason to think the opposite’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012: 12). The current breakneck acceleration in the growth of Asian and African urban areas is, they note, a case in point, with megacities such as Lagos having come to represent a stepped-up version of Western urbanisation, a model for the future ‘of *all* cities’ (ibid: 14).⁵ They stress that it is the global south that most intensely feels the effects of the socio-economic dislocations which are currently taking place on a world scale, thus to prefigure the future of the global north. It is the thesis summed up by the subtitle of the book, *How Euro-America is evolving toward Africa*: a ‘provocative’, ‘partially parodic’ and ‘counter-evolutionary’ statement meant to perform an ironic demystification and reversal of the canonical narratives of modernisation, which depict the global south as the always deferred, the not-yet, the site of delayed historical change understood as late arrival (ibid.).⁶ The worldview on which these narratives are based no longer holds up (if indeed it ever did), note the Comaroffs, who claim that ‘the material, political, social, and moral effects of the rise of neoliberalism are most graphically evident’ in what have long been construed as the peripheral others of Western modernity, which are metonymically represented by the African continent (ibid: 15). This is the geopolitical space where neoliberalism first unleashed the very worst of what it had in store for the rest of the world, which is today catching up with the global south in

witnessing rising tides of ethnic conflict, racism, and xenophobia, of violent criminality, social exclusion, and alienation, of rampant corruption in government and business, of shrinking, insecure labour markets, afflicted middle classes, and *lumpen* youth, of executive authoritarianism, popular punitiveness, and much more besides. (ibid: 18)

According to the Comaroffs, all of this means that Africa, or rather ‘Africa as imagined in Euro-America’ – ‘reality is rather more complex. And not all darkness’ – is ‘becoming a global condition’. In ‘the history of the present’, they reiterate, ‘the global south is running ahead of the global north, a hyperbolic prefiguration of its history in the making’ (ibid: 18–19).

This is no doubt a thought-provoking thesis. Even though, as some of the critics of *Theory from the south* have noted, it risks turning the global south into an amorphous and homogenising signifier that occludes the differences between the locations it designates and effaces the traces of their unique histories.⁷ That said, if we accept the idea of the south as a culturally embedded, ‘ex-centric’ designation that only works in relation to a constitutive outside (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012a: 31–32),⁸ the data the Comaroffs bring to the fore make a compelling case for their assertion that ‘the history of the present reveals itself more starkly in the antipodes’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012: 7). From turbocharged urbanisation, to the growth rate of the economy, to the pervasiveness of neoliberal social restructuring and engineering, inclusive of hyper-flexible forms of exploitation of labour, surplus extraction and processes of capital accumulation through the expropriation of land, water and raw materials, all of which see the global south leading way, it does indeed seem plausible to suggest that the key question is no longer whether the West ignores or recognises, following Johannes Fabian’s argument in *Time and the other* (1983), the ‘coevalness’ of the non-West. Instead, it ‘is whether the West recognizes that it is playing catch-up in many respects with the temporality of its others’ (ibid: 14).

Viva Riva!* and *District 9

The point of this article, though, is not to try to ascertain whether the statement that Euro-America is evolving toward Africa is empirically accurate – and anyway, what would count as conclusive evidence? – but rather to start thinking about some of the interpretive strategies it enables for cultural criticism. To do this, I discuss two recent films that go some way towards providing a narrative and aesthetic representation of some of the imaginaries this claim provocatively evokes: Djo Tunda Wa Munga’s Kinshasa-set crime thriller *Viva Riva!* (2010) and Neill Blomkamp’s *District 9* (2009).

These films have been chosen not only because of the international acclaim they have received,⁹ but also on account of them being significant examples of the recent turn to genre film and fiction across the African continent. To paraphrase Said’s argument about the contrapuntal relation between the Western archive and cultural production in the formerly colonised world, it would seem that writers and cultural producers from the global south are today increasingly imposing ‘their diverse histories on’, and mapping ‘their local geographies in’, the genres of Western mass cultural production and commercial cinema and fiction – each of which has a

representational history that associates it with the range of styles, social types and situations, as well as the historical contexts and geographical settings that were presented in previous incarnations of the genre. Hence the unsettling experience of watching a slick noir set in the streets of Kinshasa such as *Viva Riva!*: a film in which the novelty value of the richly textured representation of the unfamiliar Congolese urban setting – this is the first feature film shot in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) since President Mobutu Sese Seko shut down the local film industry in the 1980s (see Smith 2011) – is enhanced by seeing it superimposed on the range of expectations that the generic conventions carry with them. This is precisely what grabbed the attention of Anglo American film critics when *Viva Riva!* came out: from the ‘repackaging the revenge thriller in parakeet colours and distinctive African beats’ of the review in the *New York Times* (Catsoulis 2011), to the ‘smell of authenticity about the ramshackle location [Wa Munga] has chosen’ for his ‘sturdy thriller’ detected by *The Guardian*’s reviewer (Pulver 2011).

Right from the opening sequence, the viewer is confronted with the powerful visual and aural impact of the place where the film, which is shot in Lingala and French, is set: a grubby, chaotic and traffic-infested metropolis where everything, from the muddy, potholed streets to the scraped and stained decrepit buildings, seems almost beyond repair.¹⁰ Wa Munga’s camera scans the crumbling surfaces of the city and its human infrastructure with evident relish and turns them into the stage for the rehearsal of a whole range of generic conventions: from the sex and violence mix typical of neo-noir flicks, with the piquant local addition of the display of naked black bodies moving to the rhythm of percussive African beats, to the many twists in the plot that, as in any good fast-paced thriller or action movie, keep the story in motion and the tension up.

The first images, interspersed with long shots of the teeming streets of Kinshasa, all point to the energy crisis that is gripping the city and to the economic practices that are tied to it: close-ups of a pair of hands counting a big bundle of US dollars and of petrol being poured into a tank from a plastic container, followed by a medium shot of a van packed with people that is being pushed by hand, and by more close-ups of someone sucking petrol out of another tank and of a handwritten cardboard sign at a petrol station that says ‘*Plus de carburant*’ [‘No fuel left’]. In the next shot, the camera takes us into the petrol station and once there we are pulled toward and into the dark interior of the empty fuel tank of an old Mercedes. The screen then briefly goes black and becomes the background for the red letters of the title, which a moment later start floating on a very large river that is being traversed by two motor-powered dugout canoes carrying oil barrels. Responsible for setting the plot in motion, these barrels also represent a resonant geopolitical signifier. They point to the extractive economy that through the exploitation of the continent’s natural resources, especially minerals and oil, is repositioning Africa within the ‘neoliberal

world order' as (yet again) a global supplier of raw materials (Ferguson 2006: 194–210). The canoes are driven by African men who are heading to Kinshasa, where Riva (Patsha Bay Mukuna) is going to meet his business partner, G.O., who owns the warehouse where they will keep the oil while they wait for the right moment for the basic speculative move in a time of scarcity: sell when the commodity you have is in short supply and hard to get, so its market value is peaking. In G.O.'s words: 'The price keeps going up, tomorrow it'll explode. Then I'll sell it all.'

Riva has returned to Kinshasa after spending ten years in Angola, where he got the oil he has brought home. He is followed by a gang of Angolans led by the ruthless Cesar (Hoji Fortuna), who is after the loot he claims Riva stole from him. To complicate matters, soon after the beginning of the movie, Riva falls in love with Nora (Manie Malone), a redhead beauty who turns out to be the girlfriend of local crime boss Azor (Diplome Amekindra), 'the strong man of Kinshasa'. As we follow Riva, who is chasing Nora and being chased by both the Angolans and Azor and his men in a city that defies cognitive mapping – no monumental or other recognisable urban landmark is ever in view – Kinshasa's streets, houses and nightlife become the setting for a distinctively contemporary African cinematic aesthetics. This temporal situatedness is underscored by the elision of history, most notably that of the transition from the colonial to the postcolonial moment, performed by the film, which does not provide any historical narrative or thesis to contextualise the action. Even the genre's standard biographical account of the making of the criminal or gangster, which normally provides some kind of socio-historical rationalisation for his life choices – think of *Jerusalema* (2008) – is here reduced to a few flashbacks and dialogues vaguely pointing to an intergenerational conflict between Riva and Nora and their parents. It is money, cash flashed at every opportunity and serving as both signified and signifier of consumerist desire, which provides the one-dimensional motive and source of action, thus rendering superfluous any other rationalisation. When Nora, who is also the daughter of a history teacher, rhetorically asks Riva, 'You have never opened a history book, have you?', Riva replies: 'You know, as for us, we're looking for money. History ...'. In the whole film, there is only one passing reference to colonialism – Cesar's disparaging remark about the DRC: 'This country is the worst cow pie I've ever seen. Maybe you should have remained colonised.'

Viva Riva! is situated in a present detached from the past and represented as its own social and political failure – a reminder of the DRC's current fourth position, after South Sudan, Somalia and the Central African Republic, in the Fund for Peace's much cited *Failed states index*, recently renamed *Fragile states index*.¹¹ The postcolonial state, or indeed any kind of institutional infrastructure, is only present as a highly corrupt policing and military apparatus, which appears to be uniquely there for the self-enrichment of those who have made their way through its ranks; officials who are constantly busy asking for bribes and blackmailing anyone they

come across. They are the embodied, conspicuous presence of a ‘failed state’ wherein on all sides there ‘is evidence of the lack of a functioning government’ (Hochschild 2009). Riva and his antagonists, Azor and Cesar, do not really have any system to confront, only each other. Representatives of official institutions do not even try to maintain the pretence of abiding by the laws, rules or codes of behaviour they are supposed to uphold, but are in fact fully part of the criminal economic network and perfectly integrated with its logic.¹²

The withering away of the state and its dysfunction have of course become key tropes in the discourse of much contemporary geopolitical analysis. A number of recent interventions have played with the notion of the failed state to designate a global question (see, e.g., Bull 2006; Chomsky 2006; Hitchcock 2008), which *Viva Riva!* brings into relief from the vantage point of the DRC. But to locate the image of Africa presented by the film within the global present, I return to the energy crisis with which it starts. A recurrent scenario of many a dystopian and science fiction film – from, say, the *Mad Max* franchise (1979–2015) to *Avatar* (2009) – the exhaustion of the earth’s oil supplies and natural resources has increasingly functioned in the last few decades as the end point of the narrative of progress against which the Comaroffs pitch their argument. This is the narrative of modernisation that corresponds to the emergence and consolidation of a model of ‘oil capitalism’ that according to many analysts is now approaching a terminal decline brought about by the overconsumption of the source of energy on which it is dependent. Imre Szeman, for instance, suggests that ‘Oil capital seems to represent a stage that neither capital nor its opponents can think beyond. Oil and capital are linked inextricably, so much so that the looming demise of the petrochemical economy has come to constitute the biggest disaster that “we” collectively face’ (Szeman 2007: 807; see also Szeman 2011). The looming crisis in worldwide oil supplies represents a collective nightmare to which we – including our cinema, literature and other forms of cultural production – are failing to imagine alternatives. What we have instead are either the utopian fantasy of the discovery of new, clean and limitless energy resources ‘(the unobtainium of James Cameron’s *Avatar*)’ or ‘postapocalyptic scenarios – cautionary tales about where our fiction of surplus might lead’ (Szeman 2011: 325).

My claim, then, is that *Viva Riva!* can be read, among other ways, as one such cautionary tale. Much as the film linguistically and visually draws attention to its Kinshasa setting – including through the stunning music score, which mixes traditional Congolese rumba with contemporary local rap – its narrative is reinserted into global cultural and economic networks both by its use of generic conventions, and by the universalising function of signifiers such as oil and US dollars. This narrative can thus be seen as yet another instantiation of ‘the reduction of everything to the price tag and the flattening out of motivations to the sheerly financial’ that characterise a good deal of contemporary popular culture (Jameson 2010: 366–367).

In other words, my suggestion is that the film's post-apocalyptic urban landscape, with a city gripped by a perennial energy crisis and a society in the midst of decline and systemic failure, complete with a dysfunctional economy based on speculation on volatile and scarce resources, is legible through the lens of a narrative in which 'the global south is running ahead of the global north, a hyperbolic prefiguration of its future-in-the-making' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012: 19).

This brings us to the second film I want to discuss, Neill Blomkamp's *District 9*, whose originating idea was precisely that the world is heading south. In the words of the director: 'The film doesn't exist without Jo'burg. It's not like I had a story and then I was trying to pick a city. It's totally the other way around. I actually think Johannesburg represents the future. What I think the world is going to become looks like Johannesburg' (quoted in Smith 2009). What this future looks like, Blomkamp makes clear in another interview: 'From a photographic standpoint, there was what I wanted to convey about Johannesburg, which is that it's almost this burnt, nuclear wasteland, at least in winter. [...] Then there's this constant sense of an urban prison, with razor wire and electric fences and armed guards everywhere. It's a very oppressive-feeling city' (quoted in O'Hehir 2009). Wire fenced, faded by the sun, grim, dry and dusty, surrounded by informal settlements: this is Johannesburg as seen from Chiawelo, one of the poorest areas of Soweto, or the mine dumps south of the city centre, where the movie was shot in the middle of winter – a bleak, gritty image that is historically rooted in the visual repertoire of late apartheid-era South African film and documentary.¹³ Like the story it tells, *District 9*'s visual texture points to an intersection of temporalities that superimpose a dystopian view of the present – as opposed to the image of a possible future that is advancing upon us of Darko Suvin's (1979) classic definition of the temporalities of science fiction – on allusions to the institutionalised racial segregation engendered by the apartheid system.¹⁴

Just as in *Viva Riva!*, the opening scenes bring into view an unfolding social crisis, which in this case is precipitated by the arrival of an alien spaceship that has stopped over South Africa's biggest metropolis. We hear the voice over saying: 'Now, to everyone's surprise, the ship did not come to a stop over Manhattan, or Washington, or Chicago, but instead coasted to a halt directly over Johannesburg.' The movie is set in 2010, almost 30 years after the space ship got stuck in the sky over Johannesburg and the aliens it hosted – 'a million of them', one commentator estimates – were saved by the humans, who then proceeded to put them in a refugee camp named District 9. Filmed alternately as a mock-documentary that shifts between the present tense of the footage and the past tense of the commentary, and in more canonical cinematic style, *District 9* begins with a wave of anti-alien riots and the consequent plan to relocate the aliens to another camp, District 10, situated 200 kilometres away. This, in turn, sends us back not only to the forced removals of the apartheid era – which are of course evoked by the camps' names – but, zooming in on the present,

also to the xenophobic attacks that took place throughout South African townships and inner-cities in 2008, when the movie was being shot: from the scene in which humans march on the alien settlement armed with *pangas* and *knobkieries*, to the interviews with the denizens of Johannesburg who repeat standard xenophobic stereotypes, here ludicrously distorted by the references to the aliens: ‘They are spending so much money to keep them here, when they could be spending it on other things, but at least, at least they are keeping them separate from us’; and, most preposterously: ‘If they were from another country we might understand, but they are not even from this planet.’ Troublingly, though, these stereotypes are not just allegorised through the representation of human hostility toward the aliens. They are also problematically reproduced by the portrayal of Nigerian immigrants as a gang of criminals, arms traffickers, practitioners of witchcraft and prostitutes led by the ferocious and cannibalistic Obesandjo (Eugene Khumbanyiwa), who have settled in the refugee camp to exploit the aliens by selling them the cat food they crave.¹⁵

Caught up between the humans and the aliens is Wikus van de Merwe (Sharlto Copley), the zany caricature of a petty Afrikaner bureaucrat who is tasked by the brilliantly named Multinational United (MNU) to direct the forced removals from District 9. Soon after the beginning of the operation, Wikus is contaminated with the alien liquid that kick-starts his Kafkaesque metamorphosis into a ‘prawn’, as the aliens are called on account of their perceived resemblance to the crustacean. This turns out to be the central narrative thread of the film. The metamorphosis reduces Wikus to a being deprived of the rights bestowed by human citizenship – of ‘the right to have rights’, to quote Hannah Arendt’s (1958: 296–297) discussion of how ‘the loss of home and political status’ as a citizen results in ‘the expulsion from humanity altogether’. It thus also leads to his collaboration with the alien scientist Christopher Johnson, who is working underground to produce the fluid – which happens to be the substance that contaminated Wikus – that will allow him to restart the spaceship. The confrontation between the two allies and MNU – whose potentially radical or utopian political implications are, on the other hand, promptly undermined by the segregationist horizon in which, as Wikus spells out, it is reinscribed: ‘I can go home. You can go home. [...] You can take all the prawns with you’ – brings the two into conflict with a configuration of power that, in Shaun de Waal’s (2009) words, is what is most ‘contemporary’ about *District 9*: ‘that the removals are being conducted by a huge multinational rather than the state. In fact, the state is conspicuous by its absence here.’

What gives the film its sharpest political edge – ‘its eagerness to take the most outlandish aspects of our present at face value’ (Marx 2010: 164) – is arguably its representation of the biopolitical territorial structure of multinational capitalism, which is shown as operating in a line of continuity with the apartheid state. This regime of biopolitical control is based on governmental practices that produce

new forms of social stratification, division and spatial incarceration whose matrix continues to be the logic of segregation;¹⁶ not to mention the shared logic of biologically grounded scientific racism and of the most disturbing aspect of MNU operations, namely the biotechnological programme aimed at replicating the aliens' DNA, which is necessary to operate their weaponry.

A political reading of the film should therefore also try to establish whom the aliens 'represent'. Largely eschewing questions about their physicality or the organisation of their society, in which *District 9* is not really interested – all we have on the latter are human speculations about how the crisis on the ship came to be and the vague suggestion that Christopher Johnson is some kind of leader, expert or superior specimen – the film is rather invested in playing with the parodically allegorical possibilities opened up by the aliens' partial anthropomorphisation: from the 'clicks' in their speech, to their taste for meat (not only cat food but cow heads and the like), all the way to the trumped-up scandal about the 'prolonged sexual activity' with aliens that the media present as the cause of Wikus' metamorphosis (a thinly disguised metaphor, together with the references to the Nigerian prostitutes who engage in inter-species transactional sex, for miscegenation).¹⁷ Although Blomkamp stops short of presenting us with a straightforward allegory, the aliens have been read as a grotesquely caricaturised figure for the stereotype of a 'shiftless, violent, and degenerate urban African lumpenproletariat' (Moses 2010: 159), bestialised cat food-eating 'bottom feeders' who stand in for the continent's urban-based multitudes and surplus population (Clover 2009: 8), 'doppelgangers of the black working class or poor shack dwellers who feature marginally in the film without being brought into the limelight' (Van Veuren 2012: 574).

If so, *District 9* is mostly bent on capitalising on the dark comedic effects and political satire produced by the human rationalisation of alien behaviour and presence among us.¹⁸ The segregationist logic produced by the fear of the other, which is exploited by the ruthless multinational that has taken over governmental functions, is the key element Blomkamp uses to articulate a dystopian scenario depicted in the here and now of a selectively represented South African urban landscape. If the cognitive estrangement (Suvin 1979) performed by science fiction serves to show the present in a new, future-oriented or 'alien' light, Blomkamp short-circuits its temporalities by portraying a present that turns into an apocalyptic version of itself. It is the idea also behind Blomkamp's much less inspired and more flatly allegorical *Elysium* (2013), where the global south – in this case visually represented by some of the poorest areas of Mexico City – is made to stand for the grim future of a polluted and overpopulated planet that the rich one per cent has vacated to relocate in a green and luxurious space habitat, from where it keeps exploiting the planet and its destitute multitudes while keeping them at a safe distance.

But to go back to *District 9*, in my reading I have tried to suggest that, like *Viva Riva!*, Blomkamp's first film lends itself to be interpreted in light of the 'counter-evolutionary' historical narrative of *Theory from the south*. The African urban locations both films use as settings do not represent the backward other of a Western-centred modernity, but rather the present of a world of which they prefigure both the impending crisis and how to survive (in) it:

If the taste for apocalypse stems from an experience that western exceptionalism is being threatened [...], then the contemporary experience in the Global South – of which *District 9* is a symbolic representation – is much more complex. Whole populations in the Global South are in fact 'living the apocalypse' (from the perspective of a once-dominant West), but even so, life goes on in a pragmatic, patchwork fashion. (Helgesson 2010: 174)

Djo Tunda Wa Munga makes exactly the same point about Kinshasa city dwellers: 'For 20 years, Kinshasans have lived through every spirit-crushing experience – war, crime, corruption, shortages, poverty and the break-up of the family. Yet their clocks still keep on ticking, and life goes on' (quoted in Clarke 2011). Life, that is, as the condition of precarity and survival.

Viva Riva! ends with the image of Riva's young friend, Anto, who after the explosion of the truckload of stolen oil and the death of all the main protagonists (except Nora) sits in Cesar's SUV with the bag full of money he left behind. A Congolese rumba kicks off and Anto plays with the steering wheel, smiling and daydreaming, imagining himself as the car's affluent owner. It is clear, however, that his newly acquired wealth does not stand for an opportunity to escape, for there is no suggestion that there is anywhere to escape to. All that seems to be at stake for him is survival; surviving the spell money represents, haunted by the echo of Nora's words: 'In this country you think money is everything. [...] Money is like poison. At the very end it always kills you.' Likewise, precarity and survival also affectively dominate *District 9*'s final sequence. After the long, noisy, relentlessly violent action scenes leading to Christopher Johnson's departure, the film ends with an image of District 10, where the aliens have been relocated to live in tiny tents reminiscent of both a refugee camp and the 'matchbox houses' built by the apartheid regime for South African blacks. As we read on the superimposed script, this camp 'now houses 2.5 million aliens and continues to grow'. After that, we are left with Wikus who, as he is waiting for the return of Christopher Johnson, desperately tries to hold on to what he considers his true being, his humanity, by making a flower out of garbage for his estranged wife.

In the last paragraph of *Culture and imperialism*, with which I started, Edward Said also writes about survival. For Said, its possibility is located at the intersection of culture and politics:

No one can deny the persisting continuities of long traditions, sustained habitations, national languages, and cultural geographies, but there seems to be no reason except fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness, as if that is what human life was about. Survival in fact is about the connection of things. (Said 1993: 408)

By contrast, to the extent that *Viva Riva!* and *District 9* can be said to point to a notion and the possibility of survival, this is one that is constitutive of being as such, of an affirmation of life in the face of its precarity, disposability and insecurity.¹⁹ It may well be what is ultimately most contemporary about them.

Notes

1 According to Immanuel Wallerstein, US power had already started to decline in the 1970s (Wallerstein 2003).

2 Here is the list: Mongolia, Macau, Libya, China, Bhutan, Timor-Leste, Iraq, Mozambique, Rwanda, Ghana.

3 See <http://www.worldatlas.com/citypops.htm> (accessed 5 September 2013). According to this website (other sources provide slightly different lists), the 20 largest cities in the world ranked by population are: Tokyo, Seoul, Mexico City, New York, Mumbai, Jakarta, São Paulo, Delhi, Ōsaka/Kobe, Shanghai, Manila, Los Angeles, Calcutta, Moscow, Lagos, Cairo, Buenos Aires, London, Beijing, Karachi.

4 Another projection: a recent report by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs predicts that by 2050 the population of Nigeria will surpass that of the US and that half of the global population growth between now and 2050 will be in Africa (UN DESA 2013).

5 The Comaroffs draw on claims about the repositioning of southern cities at the forefront of global urban developments that can be found in the writings of several urban studies scholars who work on African, Asian and Latin American cities (see, e.g., Koolhaas and Cleijne [2007]; Edensor and Jayne [2012]).

6 Despite the qualifiers used by the authors to draw attention to the playfulness of their subtitle, some commentators have objected that the notion of Euro-America's evolution toward Africa remains misleading. Srinivas Aravamudan (2012: 10), for instance, argues that "evolution" toward Africa – whether serious or parodic – is no evolution at all, but a deterioration, and Euro-America's evolution toward Africa is the equivalent of the entire world going to hell in a hand-basket, where "hell" is "Africa" and the "hand-basket" is "late capitalism".

7 See, e.g., Ato Quayson's otherwise positive review (Quayson 2012: 27).

8 See the definition:

the 'south' cannot be defined, *a priori*, in substantive terms. The label bespeaks a *relation*, not a thing in or for itself. It is a historical artefact, a labile signifier in a grammar of signs whose semiotic content is determined, over time, by everyday material, political, and cultural processes, the dialectical products of a global world in motion. This, incidentally, is

why, for certain purposes but not for others, some or all of ‘the east’ may be taken to be part of it (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012: 47).

9 *Viva Riva!* was the recipient of six African Movie Academy Awards in 2011, including for Best Picture, Best Director and Best Cinematography, and of the 2011 MTV Movie Award for the Best African Movie, while *District 9* won the 2010 Saturn Award for Best International Film presented by the Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror Films.

10 In the interview that accompanies the DVD, Wa Munga comments that he conceived the movie ‘as an opportunity to show Africa and to show Kinshasa in a way that had never been seen before: all the colours, all the documentary part, where you feel the reality, but you also feel the texture of the world, you also feel the texture of the interiors [...] in houses and in the streets’ (*Viva Riva!* 2010).

11 See <http://library.fundforpeace.org/library/cfsir1423-fragilestatesindex2014-06d.pdf>

12 Corruption and greed completely engulf the world of *Viva Riva!*, including religious institutions and their representatives. As Father Gaston puts it: ‘Priests need fuel too, alas.’

13 In the DVD’s ‘The alien agenda: a filmmaker’s log’, Blomkamp explains that ‘we really had access to the area’ where much of the film is shot ‘and we could only build our additional shacks because all of [its] residents were moved into RDP houses somewhere else in Jo’burg’. ‘The gritty feel of the film is reminiscent of 1980s apartheid-era film and television images of struggle and conflict, a texture that has been internationally saleable for decades as “authentically” South African’ (Van Veuren 2012: 571).

14 The latter are, however, less prominent than in the short film on which *District 9* is based, *Alive in Joburg*, which is replete with subsequently expunged historical references. Compared to its predecessor, *District 9* is more distinctively situated in a future-oriented (political) present.

15 According to Quayson (2009), ‘in the social imaginary of *District 9* it is the Nigerians that are the true Other. The prawns are only partially so, because they are shown to possess superior “human” characteristics of familial love, reason (in the mastery of science), and political consciousness (in the prawn leader’s desire to come back and save his people)’.

16 Another quasi-mandatory reference that I do not have space to discuss in this context would be to Giorgio Agamben’s (1998: 171–174) theorisation of the logic of ‘the camp’ as the ‘very paradigm’ of ‘the political space of modernity itself’. For some suggestions as to where this discussion might lead, see Marx (2010: 165) and Helgesson (2010: 173).

17 On the history of the representation of the alien body and the epistemological and political questions it opens up, see Fredric Jameson’s discussion in *Archaeologies of the future* (2005: 119–145).

18 See Van Veuren’s (2012: 571) reading:

The film consists of a patchwork of clashing modalities: *vérité* documentary style and science fiction, horror and satirical farce, redemption film and splatter flick. These modalities themselves represent a sometimes camp caricaturing of filmic styles, including ‘expert’ commentary from staff of the ‘University of Kempton Park’; as the film unfolds, it becomes

clear that most elements in the film, not least of all the human and alien characters, share this element of caricature.

19 For a discussion of the range of meanings attached to the adjective precarious in contemporary theory and their relevance to contemporary cultural production see, inter alia, Frassinelli and Watson (2013).

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